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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Northern Ireland Women's European Platform, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

While recognizing the importance of the priority theme of the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges", it must be recognized that it cannot be addressed in isolation. The review theme of the session, "The financing of gender equality and the empowerment of women", also plays a pivotal role. Member States, in order to advance women's participation and recognition at a social, economic and political level, need to put in place sufficient resources and strong mechanisms to tackle gender inequalities. Therefore by eradicating gender inequalities Member States will address the major discriminations faced by rural women.

Rural women in Northern Ireland

There are 490,822 women in rural Northern Ireland out of a population of 863,872 women. Rural women therefore constitute 56.8 per cent of the women, 29 per cent of the population as a whole and 51 per cent of the population of rural areas (see Marie Crawley, "The Grass Ceiling — Audit of Women in Rural Areas of the North of Ireland", Women's Research and Development Agency (2006)). Lower earning is just one of the inequalities rural women face. While women in Northern Ireland are those most in poverty, rural women experience greater levels of deprivation.

Equality and devolution: agreed conclusions on financial gender equality and the empowerment of women — paragraph 6

In both 1999 and 2008 the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women expressed concern that protection of women's human rights would be uneven across the devolved regions of the United Kingdom, and this has proven to be the case. There is an increasing gap in relation to a number of aspects of equality between women in Northern Ireland and in the rest of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. These include public and political representation, lack of progress on the development of an integrated child-care strategy and anti-poverty measures, as well as the introduction of a new Equality Bill for England, Scotland and Wales. Government Equality Units in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are underresourced, having not been given sufficient powers to enforce strong policies and actions across departments to pursue gender mainstreaming and to ensure increased women's participation in the social, economic and political areas. An example is, as part of the Government's drive to cut costs, the Women's National Commission, set up in 1969 as the national, independent organization to present the views of women to Government, as an advisory non-departmental public body was abolished, leaving a gap in the coordination of policy, information and cooperation on issues across the United Kingdom at national and international levels.

Decision-making and public life: agreed conclusions on financing gender equality and the empowerment of women — paragraph 9

We would strongly argue that the limited progress in Northern Ireland in relation to equality for women is linked to underrepresentation in decision-making. In the current Legislative Assembly in Northern Ireland only 15 out of 108 members

are women. Only 22 per cent of councillors in local government are women and fewer than 34 per cent of members of public bodies are women (these bodies are responsible for significant aspects of public administration in Northern Ireland, including health and social care, education and equality). Despite pressure from international bodies and measures set out in the Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland, there has been a lack of concrete measures to address this underrepresentation. Even where measures have been introduced, such as the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act, this has not been used.

The rural development programme worth approximately £100 million in 2008 set up seven local action groups that comprised local elected representatives and civic society. The responsibility for the delivery of the six measures saw only two of the local action groups manage to ensure that 40 per cent of the group was female. One group of 22 members had only 7 female members (see "Policy Update", Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network, Summer 2008).

Investing in women and girls: agreed conclusions on financial gender equality and the empowerment of women — paragraph 11

In the recent economic downturn, like most women at an international and European level, women in Northern Ireland are experiencing high unemployment. In 2010 research of the Institute for Public Policy Research on youth unemployment and the recession found that among 16- to 24-year-olds unemployment is highest for those with no qualifications. Just 7 per cent of women in Northern Ireland are self-employed and only 2.4 per cent are entrepreneurs. Northern Ireland's figure for women's entrepreneurial activity is far below that of the European Union. Just one in eight board members of companies listed in the Financial Times Stock Exchange 100 index is a woman; at the current rate of change it will take over 70 years to achieve improvement.

Importance of non-governmental organizations (NGOs): agreed conclusions on financial gender equality and the empowerment of women — paragraph 15

It is estimated that there are over 800 women's groups and organizations in Northern Ireland, the strength of their diversity is their representation of the diversity of women. During this period of financial crisis there is a weakness in the infrastructure at global, European and national levels to provide sufficient resources for community involvement, support and commitment to active citizenship. The women's sector in Northern Ireland was in the past the very place where this was nurtured and developed during the Northern Ireland 40-year conflict. There needs to be building of social capital that will contribute to positive and permanent change. At present through financial constraints the women's sector is struggling to maintain its contribution to the development of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

An example of good practice to increase women's participation in decision-making was a project identified in 2000 and supported by the European Commission, the Fermanagh Women's Network in Northern Ireland. It set out to improve the participation of women's groups in the decision-making process in rural areas. Comprising only four local women's groups in the county, and run by a voluntary management committee, the network showed potential for growth and expansion and received local and regional funding. With paid staff organizing and

developing further initiatives, the number of women's groups in the county has grown from 5 to 26 (see *Women Active in Rural Development*, European Commission Directorate-General for Agriculture (2000)). Unfortunately, the project no longer has resources to provide the infrastructure and to maintain its networks.

Political commitment and budgetary resources: agreed conclusions on financial gender equality and the empowerment of women — paragraph 16

There was little or no gender impact assessment in the decisions made about the United Kingdom Emergency Budget and Comprehensive Spending Review or the Northern Ireland Budget. Women's rights and entitlements are being stripped away and an outdated "male breadwinner — dependent female carer" perspective is being imposed. The principle of gendering needs to be applied to the assessment of the recession, public spending measures, economic recovery measures and specific stimulus packages; otherwise gender inequality will be aggravated. All data gathering and analysis must be gendered to understand the different impacts on women and men (see Bronagh Hinds (Democrashe), "The Northern Ireland Economy — Women on the Edge? A comprehensive analysis of the impact on the financial crisis", Women's Resource and Development Agency (2011)).

There is no cohesive approach to research and statistics relating to women in agriculture in Northern Ireland, which makes it difficult to comprehend fully their positive contribution to the economy and stabilized rural communities. Some positive research carried out in 2002 indicated that of the regular farming activities Northern Ireland women reported, women do play a central role in ensuring the sustainability of agriculture through their on- and off-farm work (see S. Shortall, "Women in the Field: Women, Farming and Organizations", *Gender, Work and Organization*, vol. 8, issue 2). Women also play a key role in developmental work in rural areas. Of the women sampled in the report:

- 79 per cent were feeding farm labour
- 42 per cent were doing farm collections and deliveries
- 69 per cent were dealing with callers and ordering supplies
- 80 per cent were doing farm accounts and form filling
- 65 per cent were doing farming work
- 51 per cent reported having some form of off-farm employment.

A key issue for rural farming women is that they are not formally recognized in the Northern Ireland Agriculture Census, as the reporting system only allows for one principle partner. That means that in the last census 35 per cent of women who were working more than 30 hours a week on their farms were classified as "spouses of farmers" (see S. Shortfall and R. Kelly, "Gender Proofing Cap Reforms", Rural Community Network (2001)).

Conclusion

To address the inequalities faced by rural women the agreed conclusions on financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women need to be fully implemented, including the following recommendations:

- **Gender budgeting must be mainstreamed into the development of all government policies.**
- **Baselines, timelines and outcomes for addressing gender inequalities should be included in all government financial policies and actions.**
- **Recommendations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on the development of national machineries to increase women's and girls' empowerment must be implemented within a given timescale.**
- **Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) and the subsequent resolutions 1888 (2009) and 1889 (2009) should be fully implemented in countries emerging from conflict with the appropriate resources and positive actions required.**
- **There should be recognition of empowerment of women and girls during times of economic downturn, which has a multiplier effect on productivity, efficiency and sustained economic growth, and adequate resources should be provided and stereotypical attitudes of the roles of women and men eradicated.**
- **All government policies need to be rural-proofed and rural gender-proofed.**
- **Better gender awareness and gender-disaggregated information on rural women are needed.**
- **Recognition through evidence of rural farming women and evidence of their contribution to the social, and political aspects of rural life is needed.**